

# Transformation: Victory Rests with Small Units

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*[T]he poor devil in the army is marching tremendous distances, he is in the mud, he's filthy dirty, he hasn't had a full meal, he makes his maximum exertion before the fight, and [he has had] a minimum of sleep and a minimum of well-prepared food, and then he fights in a place he has never seen before, and probably goes into it in the hours of darkness. His communications are not fastened in by some contractor like Westinghouse [on] a ship. His communications are mobile and have moved about and generally go into place during the night or very hastily in the daytime. He may never see them. He may work with artillery he never lays his eyes on, which labors far in the rear and with communications that carry back reports of targets. So we almost never have completely trained infantry.*

*We came more near it in this war than in any other, but we were under great disadvantage. [O]ther services had volunteers and we did not. It [is] a completely mistaken illusion that [the infantry is] easy to train. It's been easy to badly train, and it's been badly trained in every war we've had. I made a Herculean effort to see it was rightly trained in this war. And if I hadn't had a very friendly Congress with me, I never would have gotten by with it, because they thought I was . . . doing too much in the way of preparations with these men.*

—General of the Army George C. Marshall, quoted in General Paul F. Gorman, *The Secret of Future Victories* (Arlington, VA: Institute for Defense Analysis, 1992)

**A**LTHOUGH FIELD artillery claims to be the king of battle, the infantry has long called itself the queen of battle, so it is logical to look at the infantry as the maneuver base for operations in the contemporary operating environment (COE), especially in stability operations and support operations (SOSO) like Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

Ultimately, putting boots on the ground is the infantry's reason for being. Operational experience in OEF and OIF supports this claim, as does a decade of rotations at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). Indeed, JRTC operations group commanders maintain that the key to success at the JRTC is to concentrate on platoons. That dictum carries special weight because, of all the combat training centers, only the JRTC places observer-controllers at the squad level. Sister service training

centers concentrate on companies and above.

Since 2002, the JRTC has concentrated exclusively on mission rehearsal exercises (MREs) for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The common core challenges facing squad, platoon, and company leaders during those MREs include—

- Troop-leading procedures.
- Rehearsals.
- Precombat inspections/precombat checks.
- Delegation of tasks and responsibilities.<sup>1</sup>

The same challenges have dogged small-unit leaders at the JRTC for the past decade. The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), especially in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, has documented in combat what the JRTC has been saying for years: small units—the infantry platoon and squad—are key to success in the COE, especially in SOSO.

The GWOT's demand for infantry has led the Army to increase its number of infantry-like formations by assigning infantry missions to armor, artillery, engineer, and even air defense artillery units, and the mission complexity facing infantry formations has challenged infantry leaders from squad to brigade. SOSO are a squad and platoon leader's fight. Succeeding in that fight requires companies to take on command and control (C2) and information-handling missions once left to battalions and at times even brigades. The COE's pillar of noncontiguous operations has been applied at squad, platoon, and company levels.

Former U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) commander in chief General Paul F. Gorman notes that "teamwork within the squad is more important than any individual quality, and can help decrease casualties. [General George C.] Marshall and [Lieutenant General Lesley J.] McNair centered their attention on the individual training of the infantryman, and on the individual junior officer. Both anxiously followed the progress of the arrows across their operations map, but neither seems to have made the connection between that progress and the techniques of close combat, or the necessity for collective training of infantry teams to advance the arrows. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

## Transformation

In transforming itself, the Army has not looked below the brigade level and has considered only minor changes at the battalion level. Modularity tests at the National Training Center and the JRTC are looking at the issues of realigning a brigade as a modular brigade combat team (BCT). The changes would be significant and affect commanders, staffs, and units facing increased C2 challenges, mission requirements, and operational responsibilities. Brigade operations now resemble division operations in complexity. Battalions operate more like brigades, and the cascade of increasing complexity flows all the way down to the squad. But in looking at C2 issues and leader-to-led ratios, current Army experiments regard company, platoon, and squad structures as inviolate, although both OEF and OIF show that small-unit leaders face increased challenges.<sup>3</sup>

To address this problem, the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) published Special Study 04-1, "Transforming the Tactical Staff for the 21st Century," which investigated reorganizing, strengthening, and stabilizing battalion and brigade staffs around a cohort of professional, experienced offic-

ers.<sup>4</sup> The study also looked at strengthening the collective experience in maneuver elements by shifting grades down one echelon to allow captains to command platoons and majors to command companies.

The study suggested a similar structure for non-commissioned officers (NCOs); emphasized the need to retain experienced NCOs in tactical units; and recommended that building and sustaining collective experience within tactical staffs and units receive priority over individual development. Feedback suggested further investigation of tactical leadership problems such as what to do with lieutenants if captains became platoon commanders and what to do about NCO rank rivalry if staff sergeant (SSG) squad leaders became sergeants first class (SFCs).

**Platoons.** The study began by looking at platoons. Common challenges platoon leaders face include—

- The estimate of the situation.
- The platoon leader to platoon sergeant relationship.
- Quick-response force.
- Risk management.
- Direct-fire planning and control measures.
- Military operations in urban terrain standing operating procedures.
- Casualty evacuation planning.
- Searches.

Because smaller units are assuming roles once reserved for the next higher echelon, platoons perform missions that require more detailed planning and complex execution.

The challenges faced at the platoon level hinge on experience. Current platoon leaders are too junior to have the experience necessary to meet such challenges. Platoon sergeants might not have the requisite level of experience to overcome junior officer inexperience. Our solution is to make the platoon leader a captain and his platoon sergeant a master sergeant.

With a captain commanding a platoon and a staff sergeant leading a squad, an intermediate level of leadership would accomplish several things. A section of two squads led by a lieutenant and guided by an SFC section sergeant provides young officers an entry-level position where they can learn to lead troops. Providing such officers an SFC section leader would give them access to the experience necessary for successful operations and provide a logical career progression for the SSG squad leader.

Creating a section-level SSG leadership position for the SFC requires making the platoon sergeant a master sergeant (MSG) with a logical progression

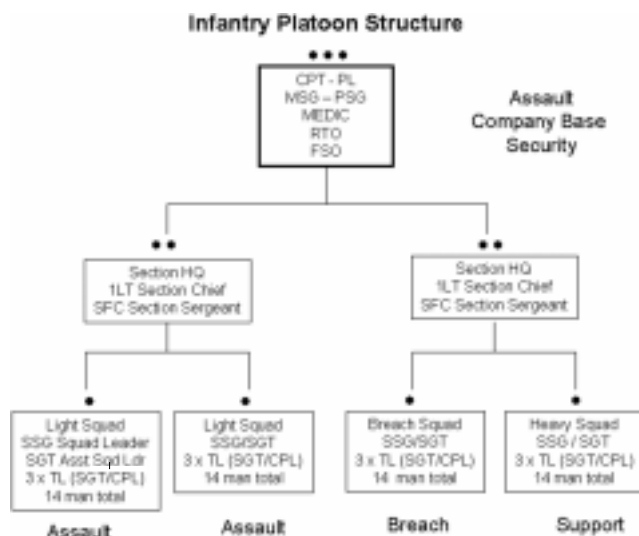


Figure 1

on to company 1st sergeant (1SG). This would add over 20 years of NCO experience to a two-section line platoon and provide a sound, experience-based platform for training young lieutenants. Building a platoon on a two-section base would ease the platoon commander's span of control and allow the platoon to fight more effectively. Adding a deputy platoon commander would allow the platoon to fight in split operations under experienced leaders.

**The rifle squad.** What could the Army do to make the two-section platoon even more effective? Remember that SOSO are a squad leader's fight. Figure 1 depicts challenges common to squad leaders beyond the core challenges. As currently organized, the squad has one leader and two four-man fire teams. As troop-to-task ratios and countless rotations at the JRTC suggest, specialized missions in that nine-man organization often must be organized and rehearsed by special teams, placing additional strains on communications, soldier and team discipline, and soldier alertness. The success of such teams hinges on squad and team leaders properly using troop-leading procedures, rehearsals, and pre-combat inspections and checks. Most often, those specialized teams fall into the categories of assault, breach, and support.

General Paul F. Gorman notes: "By far the most successful tactic [is] to use two squads as a base of fire to assure suppression of the defenders, and to advance with only one squad. General [William] DePuy pointed out that only one of four platoon attacks with two

up and one back were successful, while tactics heavy on suppression (two back, one up) succeeded nearly nine out of 10 times. He stated emphatically that he would attack a dug-in enemy with a maximum volume of suppressive fire and the smallest possible maneuver element."<sup>5</sup>

DePuy's findings and the standard JRTC team assignments suggest the squad should be reorganized into three teams: assault, breach, and support. The breach and support element under an assistant squad leader would support the assault element of four men and a squad leader. With the breach complete, the breach team would support and join the assault if necessary. Command and control is better served with four-man teams acting as a natural building block for squad combat power. The teams would benefit from a full-time squad leader and assistant squad leader, and the increased manpower organic to such a functionally organized squad would

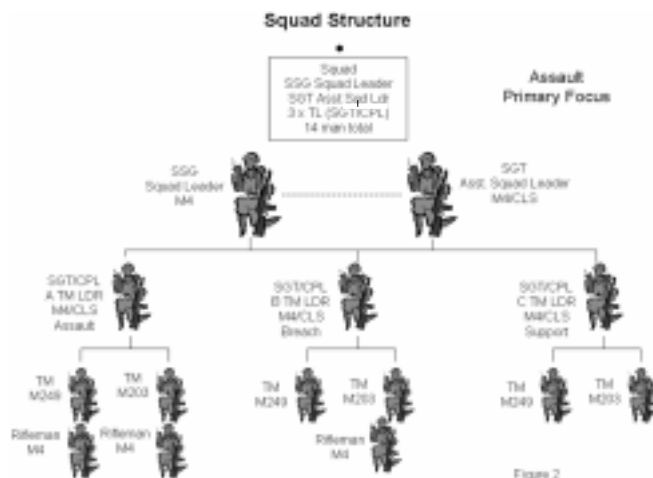


Figure 2

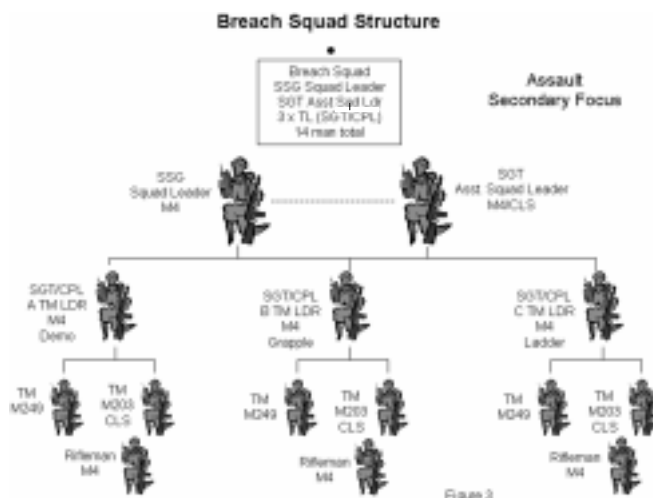


Figure 3

reduce troop-to-task ratios and help solve discipline and alertness problems.

**The weapons squad.** Light infantry has documented that a platoon soon feels the absence of a full-time weapons squad. Light infantry platoons are three-squad formations. Many light infantry commanders have created their own weapons squad leaders, but they have done so out-of-hide. The same troop-to-task ratio, communications, discipline, and alertness problems challenge those ad hoc organizations. Infantry platoons in the 82d and the 101st Airborne Divisions have retained their weapons squads in a four-squad formation.

Whether in ad hoc or table of organization and equipment (TOE) configurations, weapons squads create their own C2 problems. Under a single lieutenant and platoon sergeant, the issue often boils down to who assumes control of the weapons squad. Creating two sections offers a solution. One section would contain the standard squad organization; the other would contain a standard squad (the platoon breach element) and a heavy weapons squad (the platoon base support element). Squad-level challenges include—

- Troop-to-task ratio.
- Communications.
- Soldier discipline.
- Target acquisition/soldier alertness.

**The infantry company.** Giving the weapons and breach section additional capabilities completes the organizational changes needed to capitalize on leadership changes. The breach squad in figure 2 is a standard infantry squad trained in breach duties to accommodate engineer or other breach-support attachments.

Establishing the weapons squad as a permanent support element within the platoon support element would strengthen C2. The weapons squad should also receive light mortars and increased communications capabilities to draw on fire support. Commanded and led by more senior leaders; organized to train to standard missions; and equipped to provide its own direct and indirect fire support; the two-section infantry platoon would become a pocket company for the Army in the COE.

Given the combat power and leadership resident in such two-section platoons, increasing experience and manning at the company level becomes an obvious decision. Figure 3 depicts common challenges to company leaders and demonstrates that companies are assuming roles and missions

once associated with battalions.

Certainly, OEF and OIF document the need for increased experience at company command.<sup>6</sup> SOSO places heavier demands on company commanders. Information operations and intelligence in SOSO start at the grassroots, and the company is a key funnel in that process. Given those realities and the increased capabilities of two-section platoons, a company commanded by a major would need a larger headquarters. The traditional company headquarters composition (commanding officer, executive officer, radio telephone operator clerk, 1SG, and supply section) is inadequate.

Tactical operations, information operations, and intelligence requirements suggest that an operations/intelligence officer and NCOs are natural complements to the normal headquarters element. Structurally, the infantry company could be equipped and organized along the assault, support, and breach functional areas applied to platoons and squads.

Company-level challenges include—

- The company communications plan.
- Company command post (CP) battle tracking.
- Company CP information management.
- Use of company mortars, including mortar registration.
- Use of a sniper team to react to contact and increase the company's security/weapon posture.
- Cordon and search operations, including establishing a tactical checkpoint; synchronization and condition setting (to prevent civilian disruption of the search and to protect search teams from threat activity); and fire control measures.

Figure 4 shows a company organized in this way with two standard infantry platoons (assault), a heavy direct-fire platoon (support and breach), a heavy indirect-fire platoon (support), and a logistics platoon.

The heavy direct-fire platoon shown in figure

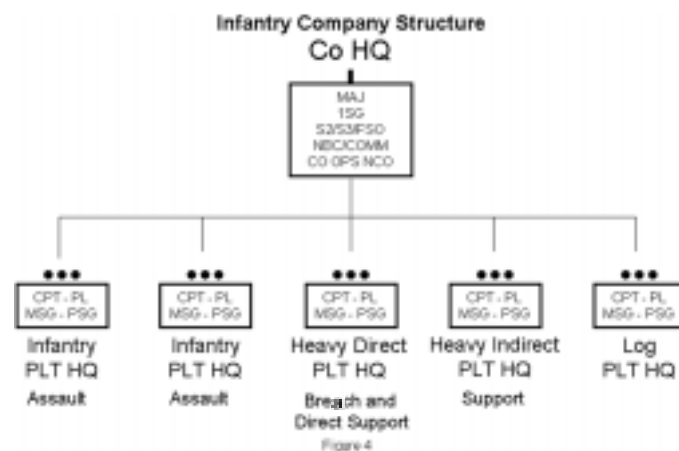


Figure 4

5 has two heavy direct-fire weapons sections, each with a heavy machinegun squad and an antitank weapons squad. Because it is the breach and direct-support element, the heavy direct-fire platoon headquarters has an engineer squad. The heavy indirect-fire platoon in figure 6 has two sections, each with a 120-millimeter (mm) mortar squad and an 81-mm mortar squad. This infantry company also has an organic logistics platoon with medical, supply, and maintenance sections to sustain the company as a semi-independent organization (figure 7).

Today's brigades and squads have greater responsibilities, larger areas to cover, and more complex missions to deal with than the linear brigades and squads of the Cold War. In its transformation, the Army has not looked below the battalion and continues to believe small-unit leaders should be junior leaders.

The challenges to junior leaders at squad, platoon, and company levels are well known. If the Army's approach remains unchanged, subordinate small units with unchanged structures will face an even greater

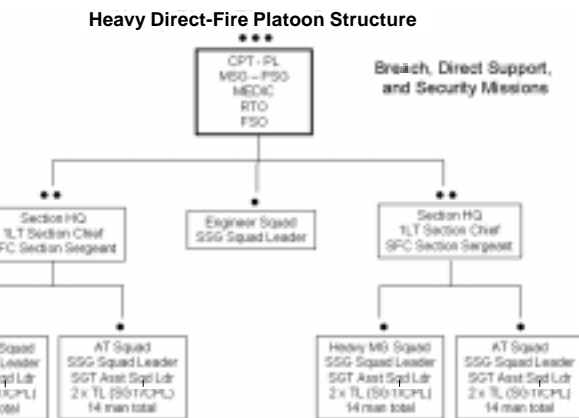


Figure 5

challenge when their higher headquarters realign. The ultimate bill-payers in this top-heavy, modular BCT metamorphosis will be the rifle squads, platoons, and companies that actually execute the missions. Those small units already face great challenges. The Army's brigade-centric approach to Transformation promises to compound these challenges. **MR**

## NOTES

1. For a complete compilation of challenges from squad through brigade, see U.S. Army Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) Special Study 05-13, "Leader Challenges at the JRTC," Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, March 2005.
2. GEN Paul F. Gorman, *The Secret of Future Victories* (Arlington, VA: Institute for Defense Analysis, 1992). Reprinted by the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, February 1992, III-7.
3. See also CSM Jack Hardwick and SGM Julius W. Gates, "A New Look at the Infantry Company," *Infantry* (November-December 2004): 35-37, which reflects a confluence of views on the need to strengthen small-unit leadership and manpower and a divergence on the exact fixes necessary.
4. CALL Special Study 04-1, "Transforming the Tactical Staff for the 21st Century," Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, March 2004.
5. Gorman, III-28.
6. CALL Handbook 05-11, "RANGER Observations from OEF and OIF," Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, February 2005. Of note is that in tailoring their missions during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the Rangers, who were already benefiting from experienced officers and noncommissioned officers at all levels, established a cross-functional team headquarters under a major's command to plan, coordinate, and execute OEF's complex missions.

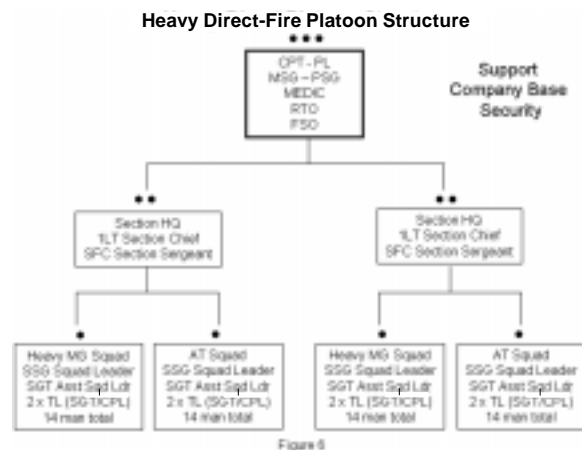


Figure 6

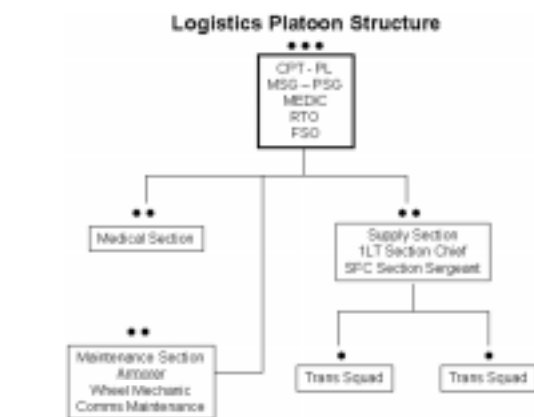


Figure 7

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